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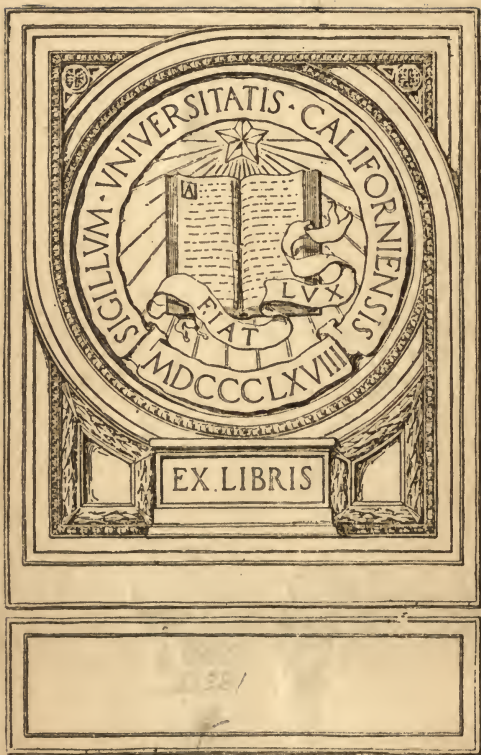
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No. 281

“FOOD”

A TRAGEDY OF THE FUTURE

In One Act

BY

WILLIAM C. de MILLE

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“FOOD.”

CHARACTERS.

BASIL..... *A New Yorker.*
IRENE..... *His Wife.*
HAROLD..... *An Officer of The Food Trust.*

SCENE:—BASIL's home in *New York City.*

TIME:—*Fifty years from now.*

"FOOD."

COSTUMES.

BASIL:—Business suit.)

Hat.

Gloves.

Overcoat.

IRENE:—Soft, clinging tea gown.

HAROLD:—Military uniform.

LIGHTS.

No changes. Full white and amber.

SCENE:—An ordinary room, furnished with rich plainness.

Doors L. I and R. 3.

Windows at back.

Table R. C., with two *chairs*.

Small *table*, with *chair* against L. wall, above door.

Chair L. of food safe.

Small *rug*, c., on curtain line.

Side board at rear, to R, of windows.

At back, L., of windows, is a *refrigerator*, made

"FOOD."

to look rather like a *safe*, with heavy iron hinges, a large *combination* lock, etc.

Fireplace and *fire*, R. 1, if possible, but not necessary.

"PROPS."

1. 2 *tables* (1 small one for telephone)
2. 4 *chairs*
3. *Small rug*
4. *Side board*
5. *Refrigerator* (to look like safe)
6. *Telephone*
7. *Fireplace* and *fire* (if possible)
8. *Check book*
9. *Blue envelope* and *blue paper* (for grocer's bill)
10. *Fountain pen*
11. 2 *table covers* (a white one, for centre table, for meal)
12. 2 *plates*
13. 2 *forks*
14. 2 *glasses*
15. 1 *platter*
16. 1 *carving knife* and *fork*
17. *Carafe* of water
18. *Small phial* of milk
19. *Medicine dropper* (to be kept in bottle instead of cork)
20. *A cracker*
21. 2 *eggs* (one for case, another to keep in the jewel-case)
22. *A leather case*
23. *Revolver* and *holster*
24. *Small package*, to look like slice of bread wrapped up
25. *Paper* to sign as Harold's receipt
26. *Jewel-box* and *jewels*

“FOOD.”

AT RISE:—IRENE is discovered sitting at table, R. c., writing a check. There is a blue envelope and paper in front of her.

She is a young woman, about 25, but very thin.

BASIL enters L. 1, wearing hat and coat. He is a man of about 30, or 35; also very thin. He comes and kisses her.

BASIL. Hello, dear! (*crossing to her, kisses her, crosses to chair L. of food safe, takes off coat, etc.*)

IRENE. Why, Basil—you're home early—(*noticing check*) Oh, Pshaw! I've done it again. (*tears up check*)

BASIL. Done what?

IRENE. Written the wrong date. I can't get it into my head that this is nineteen sixty-two after writing nineteen sixty-one for a whole year. (*starts to write another check*)

BASIL. What's the check for?

IRENE. (*very seriously*) The—the grocer's bill, Basil——

BASIL. (*very serious—pausing—crossing to front of chair L. of table R. c.*) Oh—I—I see—(*picks up bill—sits—reads it—then cheers up a bit*) Why, it's not as large as last month.

IRENE. No, it's less than six thousand dollars——

BASIL. (*scrutinizing items*) Yes—five thousand

eight hundred and sixty-seven dollars and forty-four cents—what's the forty-four cents? (*rather stern manner and tone*)

IRENE. (*ashamed*) Four grains of sugar—

BASIL. (*lays bill on table—rises—crossing L.—in light reproof*) We must be careful about sugar, dear.

IRENE. (*in pained explanation*). I've tried to be, Basil—(*rises—takes pen and check book with her—crosses across to him L.*) and really—the bill is not much—when you consider how food has gone up.

BASIL. (*in happier, lighter tone*) Anyhow, we must live—and I'm as hungry as a wolf—let's have dinner now—

IRENE. Half an hour early—?

BASIL. I'm awfully hungry—

IRENE. (*crossing to side board*) All right—(*pointing to food safe*) Open the food safe—will you, dear—(*IRENE at side board arranging plates together, platter on top, with forks and carvers on platter—starts over to table—BASIL opening door of safe, burglar alarm, (bell) rings—IRENE starts*) I always forget that burglar alarm! (*BASIL reaches behind safe and turns off burglar alarm*)

IRENE (*setting table*) What brings you home so early to-day, dear?

BASIL. (*crossing from safe to table*) I'm on the Jury. We just finished a case. (*seats himself R. of table*) A very sad one, too. A man was being tried for killing a hen.

IRENE. (*shocked, at the word "hen" drops fork on plate with noise*) Oh, the beast!

BASIL. Yes— His only excuse was that his family was starving— He was found guilty—

IRENE. (*pausing setting table—looking at him in reproach*) And you—helped sentence him—to death?

BASIL. There was nothing else to do—(*IRENE goes to side board gets carafe and 2 glasses, back*

to table) Don't you understand—he killed a *hen*—
(IRENE *starts*) killed it in cold blood—a man who
can do that deserves no pity——

IRENE. (*coming over from side board—filling
glasses*) But his family——

BASIL. Oh, you women—are so sentimental—
(IRENE *takes carafe up to side board, leaves it—gets
platter—starts with it toward safe*) have you for-
gotten that the hen is the fowl who lays eggs?

IRENE. (*reels—half fainting*) Eggs— Oh!

BASIL. Irene! (*springs to feet—goes hurriedly
to her, around chair R. of table*) What's the matter?

IRENE. (*recovering—avoiding help*) Nothing—
nothing, dear—I'm better now—but, wait a minute
I've a treat for you to-night—(*continues to safe—
BASIL returns to table and seats himself in chair R.,
expectantly. IRENE opens safe, takes out cracker—
lays it on platter—bears it over to table triumph-
antly*)

BASIL. (*rather reproachfully*) By Jove, dear—
but we *are* living high—IRENE *returns to food
safe—is busy there*) a cracker——

IRENE. (*facing him triumphantly*) And milk—
(*turns to safe again—gets out very small bottle—
crossing to table with it*)

BASIL. (*almost horrified*) Milk! Cracker and
milk—on the same day—(IRENE *with a medicine
dropper dropping a drop into each glass, half filled
with water*) Isn't that rather——

IRENE. (*pausing to explain*) But you're making
a hundred thousand a year!

BASIL. (*gentle reproof*) Still there's no use
squandering it, is there? (*happier tone. IRENE is
now seated, opposite him, at table, chair L.*) How-
ever, I suppose we can treat ourselves once in a
while—(BASIL *carves the cracker—serves her with
half, then himself—they eat it with forks—she only
tastes hers*) and it is delicious. (*smacking his lips.
Reminiscently*) Remember—when we were first

married we couldn't have these little luxuries—*(thoughtfully sad)* but—you know whenever I sit down to a meal like this—I think of the poor—who can't buy proper food——

IRENE. *(also thoughtfully sad)* Yes——

BASIL. That's why we could show no mercy to that man to-day— You see—what made it so terrible was—that the hen was about to become a——

IRENE. *(getting faint again)* Don't—don't Basil—*(head sinks on table)*

BASIL. *(leaning over and grasping hand)* Why, my dear child—what is the matter? *(she doesn't answer)* You must see the doctor—*(IRENE rises—crosses to behind table)* I've noticed you haven't been yourself for some time. You haven't been eating well—why, look there—you've hardly touched your dinner——

IRENE. *(looks slowly at plate—turns head away—gathers up both plates—empties crumbs of cracker from both to platter)* I'm not hungry—*(crossing toward safe—pauses—turning to BASIL)* You won't mind having these for breakfast, will you, dear?

BASIL. No—*(IRENE turns to safe—puts platter in)* but the doctor?

IRENE. *(crossing back to table)* Basil, I—I've seen the doctor—*(takes plates from either side—puts them together)* I went to-day—*(takes forks and carvers—puts them on top of plates—crosses to side board)*

BASIL. What did he say? *(IRENE crosses to table for glasses—pauses at table—about to speak—changes her mind)* Come—come, dear—why don't you tell me? *(IRENE crosses to side board with glasses)*

IRENE. I—I— Oh, what's the use, Basil—it—*(crossing back to table)*

BASIL. It's something serious then?

IRENE. *(sinking in chair L. of table—facing him)*

Yes—(BASIL *exclaims*) We—we might as well face it—Basil—the doctor says—I've got to eat another egg——

BASIL. (*utter dismay*) Oh, my God!

IRENE. (*weepingly, pleadingly*) I can't help it, Basil—you—you know it isn't my fault—

BASIL. (*rises, leans over table in wild pleading*) But—oh—won't a trip to Europe do—a change of scene? (*crossing past her L.*) Anything in reason—but—(IRENE *sinks back in chair, BASIL crosses to her*) Why—it's only two years ago—you had an egg—a whole one—I had to mortgage this house to get it for you—surely you can't need another so soon——

IRENE. I know it's terrible, but—I—(*facing front—cold—determined*) I must have it, Basil—

BASIL. (*crossing to L. in despairing anger*) Oh, how did you ever get this accursed taste—ah—thank Heaven the children all starved to death. They might have inherited——

IRENE. (*springing to feet in protest*) Basil! (*he stops*) That's a cruel thing to say. (*crossing toward him at L.*) I never told you how I came to be—this way——

BASIL. (*facing her in stern question*) No—you never told me—you married me without letting me know you had this—this—craving for eggs—Oh, how could you? (*crossing in sad wonder to chair at L. of table—seats himself, back to her*)

IRENE. Basil—(*coming toward him*) When I was a little girl—my parents were very, very wealthy—and once—they gave me—an egg to taste—my brother had brought it from Europe. You don't know the effect the taste of an egg has on one—the strange feeling of happiness—that once felt can never be forgotten. I—I couldn't forget it. The taste of that egg has been the memory of my waking hours, my dream, at night—sometimes the desire for it drives me to the point of

madness—oh—don't look at me like that—I *know* I shouldn't have married you—without telling you of it—but—(*going down to him—pleading*) I loved you, Basil—

BASIL. (*rises—facing her*) If you had loved me—you would have told me—(*turns slowly—measured steps—crossing from her to chair R. of table—where he stands with back to her—saddened*)

IRENE. (*pleading wildly*) I tried—I tried Basil—honestly—honestly—I tried—but I couldn't—and meanwhile—the desire grew—

BASIL. (*turns to her—over table*) Oh—but I gave you one—I gave all I had for it—

IRENE. (*tenderly, in sympathy and appreciation*) Yes, dear—I know—but it only fed the flame of my longing and now I've got to have another—I've got to—don't you understand—or I shall go mad—I can't go on like this—I've got a right to live my life—to have the food my nature craves—I must—I *will* have it. (*she sinks to table—pounds it with her fists—head buried—sobs*)

BASIL. (*going to her and putting his arms around her*) There, there, dear—don't excite yourself—come, go to bed—you'll feel better in the morning.

IRENE. (*sitting away from his embrace—facing him*) Then you won't—get it—for me—

BASIL. (*despairingly*) Great Heavens—I *can't*—

IRENE. (*turning from him—looking fixedly front—cold—hard—determined*) Very well—but I warn you, Basil—I will not answer for the consequences.

BASIL. (*angry*) Do you think you can threaten me? Ah—you could conquer this if you would. You have no right to expect me to gratify such foolish, extravagant tastes.

IRENE. (*cold—fixed, as before*) Very well—I've nothing more to say—

BASIL. (*back of her chair—turns to go—pauses back of table*) Don't take it like this—Irene—

Heaven knows I'd do it if I could—but it's out of the question—Good-night—(*continues toward door R. 3d*)

IRENE. (*cold and hard*) You're going to bed?

BASIL. (*standing at door—partly turned to her*) Yes—I—I have a touch of indigestion—Good-night.

(*He exits R. 3d.*)

(IRENE looks after him, desperate—sits a moment in thought—then faces front—her mouth working, as if eating—looks back again to door of his exit—then toward 'phone—then to door—rises—goes to 'phone on table L. takes off receiver—HAROLD knocks at door.)

IRENE. (*telephone receiver off hook, in hand*) Come in. (*HAROLD enter, stands inside doorway. IRENE is startled—rises—leaves receiver off hook. HAROLD is a good looking man—in uniform. He has a leather case strapped to his left side, a revolver, in holster, at his right*) Harold—you!! (*she crosses backward to table R. C.*)

HAROLD. (*about to run to her remembers duty of both—draws back*) Irene!

IRENE. Why do you come to me—again—after all these years?

HAROLD. (*drawing himself erect—importantly*) You see my uniform—I am an officer of the Food Trust—

IRENE. (*thought of egg—a possible way to get one—enters her mind*) An officer—the Food Trust!

HAROLD. (*cold—repressed emotion—sense of duty*) Yes— You ordered a slice of bread—(*she nods*) I was sent to deliver it—(*he hands her a small package—she takes it—puts it in food safe—he crosses across to table R. C., stands L., facing front. She comes to him, as if to reopen old acquaintance—he has taken receipt from cap—turns*

to her coldly) Please sign the receipt. (she takes it—signs—hands it back—their hands touch—both are much moved—he controls himself—crosses toward L.—putting receipt in cap)

IRENE. (leaning to him—pleadingly) Wait—Harold—don't leave me like this—you never understood—

HAROLD. (pauses—turns to her—stern—brokenly) I only know you broke my heart and ruined my life—when you married him—not for love—but—for—food—

IRENE. (turning from him—looking front—brokenly) Yes—and I've been punished—The food I crave—he can't give me—(crosses to him—leans toward left side of him)

HAROLD. (drawing away) Be careful—

IRENE. (looking toward Husband's exit door—as if HAROLD meant him) What is it?

HAROLD. (solemn importance) You mustn't touch that case—

IRENE. Why—what does it contain?

HAROLD. Hush! (looks carefully toward doors turns and lays cap on telephone table—crossing to her) An egg—

IRENE. (wondering, incredulous whisper—) An egg! An e—!

HAROLD. (rushes to her—catches her in arms—stops her mouth with hands) Sh—I—I shouldn't have told you—I'm on my way to a Billionaire's house to deliver it. (releases her while he speaks—crosses toward L.)

IRENE. (siren-like—pleading) Harold—Harold—

HAROLD. (remembering his and her duty—proof against her wiles—bitterly) No—it's too late—

IRENE. (sweetly insinuatingly) Is it too late, Harold? Are you so sure of that—Is there no spark left of the old love?

HAROLD. (tottering mentally, pauses—looks at her

—*brokenly*) God, help me—yes—(*head bowed in shame*)

IRENE. (*temptingly*) You said once—that you would do anything in the world—if I would be yours—

HAROLD. Yes—I said that—once—

IRENE. (*crossing slowly backward to table R. C.—as if luring him to her*) Then—I give you the chance to prove it—now—

HAROLD. (*about to rush to her*) You mean—that you will—

IRENE. Yes—I'll be yours—on one condition—

HAROLD. (*rushing to claim her*) Name it—name it—and I'll—

IRENE. (*at R. of table—warding him off—pointing and leaning toward him*) Wait—give me—that egg—

HAROLD. (*recoiling—pleading*) What! Oh no—you don't mean that—you're just testing me—no—anything but that—Anything else in the world—

IRENE. (*unrelentingly—determined—leaning over table to him*) Harold, give me that egg—

HAROLD. (*drawing back—in last, weakening appeal*) My duty—I haven't the right—

IRENE. (*passionate pleading*) The right—ah, what is right and wrong to us—we love each other—we've the right to live our lives—for each other—

HAROLD. You don't realize what you're asking—They know I left the store-house— If I don't return soon, they'll search and discover the truth—then I'll be a fugitive from justice—a hunted man—dishonored and disgraced—

IRENE. (*alluringly*) And am I not worth it? (*puts herself alluringly in front of him—they gaze at each other—then he clasps her passionately in his arms—kisses her. She slowly releases herself—her arm falling over him till it touches the egg-case—she is almost on her knees*) Now let me see the egg—(*after a mental struggle, he undoes the case—*

first drawing his revolver and looking about carefully. She falls to knees, adoringly sways—about to swoon—he catches her—lifts her to her feet—she frees herself from his arms) Now—we must go—quickly—but wait—you can't carry it in that case—it would be recognized—Ha—my jewel box—(crosses quickly over to the side board—takes jewel box to table—faces HAROLD, expectantly—he hesitates with egg-case in hands, remembering duty—she compels him with luring smile—he brings case and lays it on table—steps back—she takes egg out carefully—gazes at it—about to put it in case—sees jewels fill it—flings them out—puts egg in—closes lid—BASIL enters quickly, R. 3d—IRENE and HAROLD start and exclaim—she moves away from table—eyes on box—leaves box on table), Why, Basil—I thought you'd retired—

(BASIL, without speaking, moves to table—seizes jewel box—opens—seizes egg and holds it up, IRENE shrieks—HAROLD draws pistol.)

BASIL. Shoot—and watch it fall—

(HAROLD'S pistol drops to floor.)

IRENE. (timidly—wonderingly) Basil—how did you know?

BASIL. The 'phone—you left the receiver off—I heard—everything—(IRENE sinks into chair L. of table with moan. BASIL crosses beside HAROLD—stands back of small rug) So she has brought you—to this—very well—you can go—but—you will leave the egg—behind—

(HAROLD starts—cries out.)

IRENE. (springing to her feet—in protest—BASIL draws egg, protectingly to him) No—no—Basil—

you won't do that—you can't be so cruel——

BASIL. (*lowering arm from above head—gazing at egg, in hollow of hand*) And this is the price of honor—(*with an hysterical laugh—his face changes to a fixed purpose*)

IRENE. (*horrified wonder*) What—what are you going to do—Basil—Basil—Ah—! (*shrieks as BASIL dashes the egg to the floor—on the little rug at his feet. She sinks to her knees over it. HAROLD staggers back, powerless from horror*)

HAROLD. Murderer—(*crossing to BASIL*) Through all your life you'll see that horrible sight—That little egg lying there crushed and mangled, wasted—by *your* hand—Thank God I haven't got that to face——

(*BASIL turns up stage, overcome with what he has done. HAROLD turns as if to go.*)

IRENE. Harold where are you going?

HAROLD. (*turning at the door*) To give myself up——

IRENE. But it means death!

HAROLD. Yes—Good-bye——

(*Exits as if to Guillotine—Pause—door slams.*)

IRENE. (*reaching out to touch BASIL*) Basil——

BASIL. (*recoiling from her with loathing*) There can be nothing more between you and me——

IRENE. You mean?

BASIL. You have betrayed me for an egg—(*crossing R. to table*)

IRENE. Basil——

BASIL. (*points “Go.” IRENE turns, sees egg on rug, glances back to BASIL, stealthily rolls the rug up and starts to escape with it*) Irene! Have you no shame— You would take it—now!

IRENE. Yes—it's all I've got left now—(*he turns*

from her) They gave it to me when I was young—
Basil—when I was young.

(*BASIL points to the door, and she exits weeping.
The door outside slams and he sinks on his
knees by the table, shaken by silent sorrow.*)

CURTAIN.

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